

Public Relations in the New Millennium

If you're reading this article, then it's probably safe to assume that most (if not all) of us weathered the onset of Y2K with a minimum of disturbance. On the other hand, it is also conceivable that this text never made it to print at all, falling victim to one of the many ominous Y2K predictions: technology breakdowns, terrorist attacks culminating in widespread panic and violence, etc.

More than likely you are reading this thinking, "Oh no! Not ANOTHER 'In the new Millennium...'

piece." After all, by February 2000, the world will no doubt be thoroughly fed up with the hype and hyperbole of the "New Millennium." Keep in mind, however, as you read this (if you read this) that though you're seeing this article in February, I'm writing it in December. At this time, there is still much speculation about the onset of Y2K. The news is full of reports of expected terrorism, tips on "preparedness," and cautions to U.S. citizens traveling abroad. Understandably, as I sit in the Christmas-break-quiet library and ponder my theme for the February *AALL Spectrum* "Public Relations" article, the coming of the new millennium keeps bubbling to the surface. So, with that in mind, please bear with me as I add to the large collection of "Millennium Muses."

New Millennium's Impact on Law Library PR

How will this new century impact law library public relations? Technology, of course, is a major theme here. The speed at which information is becoming available shows no sign of slowing down. Most of us can barely keep up with the flow now, and it will probably only get worse. PR-savvy law librarians will improve their information management skills in order to become more visible and to increase their value to employers. The ongoing "globalization" of the Internet and the increasing accessibility of technology will

continue to make the world a smaller place. This will increase the patron base of many law libraries through electronic reference services, e-mail, and Web-based document delivery services. All of these potential patron interactions are an opportunity for successful PR activity.

As more and more information is gathered and disseminated electronically (through electronic reference, telecommuting, etc.), more and more law librarians (particularly those in private settings) could become more and more physically remote from their user bases. The element of personal contact, which is an important public relations tool, will be lost. Librarians may have to rely on different marketing techniques to spotlight their abilities and value. Customized Web pages, e-mailed research hints, and electronic newsletters are all ways the "Library of the New Millennium" can market its services.

Even libraries that maintain a traditional user base will be affected by these changes. Librarians will be expected to have an even-greater knowledge of technology. We will be expected to know even more about which Internet search engine is better, what information is and is not available via the Web, and how to impart this information to others. In other words, a larger portion of our work as librarians will entail training others.

Let's face it, every year more and more law students, attorneys, and executives are willing, able, and want to do more of their own information gathering. Librarians will be the conduits through which many of these users learn the skills necessary to obtain needed information. Many librarians will have to learn to shift from a "do-er" to a "show-er" mode. Therefore, another valuable PR skill for the new century will be the ability to teach and give presentations.

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Distance Learning

Even teaching and presentation methods will have to adapt to technological changes. Recent trends in distance learning have already shown that it is possible to conduct large, advanced training sessions over the Internet. Online tutorials and self-propelled exercises will also be useful in appealing to user groups whose schedules cannot conform to regular class lecture times. Although, for some of us, this distance learning trend will mean re-tooling our teaching and presentation skills, for others this innovation will present an opportunity for acquiring new skills and for professional development training. Distance learning provides exciting possibilities for our profession as a whole. Through distance learning, people will have an opportunity to attend library school and other courses regardless of geographic location or busy schedule. This could have the effect of attracting greater numbers of people to the profession, as well as attracting a more diverse population. A larger and more diverse profession means a broader spectrum of experiences and abilities available to patrons, which could also translate into good PR for our profession.

Regardless of their experience, education, and background, all law library professionals in this new millennium will require one essential PR tool: flexibility. This translates into the ability to redefine duties, position, and value to an employer ... the ability to adjust to a constantly changing information environment and a consistently mobile and sophisticated patron base.

The coming years promise to be exciting ones for information professionals. By remaining aware, educated, and flexible, we will meet any challenge the new millennium throws at us. By continuing to provide accurate, efficient, and professional services, we will have the most effective and important PR tool a profession can have: its members.

Clare D. Membiela (cmembiel@law.miami.edu) is the Head of Reference Services at the University of Miami Law Library in Miami, Florida.